

Sustainability in the Art Building

Kate Martinson, Professor of Art
Luther College

Artists are the makers of things. We create these for ourselves or in reaction to exterior forces ranging from such things as economic necessity of the artist to political ideology to fashion. Teaching artists create not only things, but also create the intentional environment in which students can understand what visual art is, what it ought to be and how individuals can participate in it. The myth of the 'lone artist in the garret' encourages society to think of artists as having little interest in sustainability other than in a personal means of survival. However, sustainability is increasingly finding, and in many cases re-establishing, a place in studio, workshop and classroom. Teaching artists are finding that topics of and work with sustainability is 'invading' our space in higher education.

As a Watson Fellow in the mid-1970's I spent a year researching traditional fiber practices, particularly in Scandinavia, the UK and Canada. My concern was with the disappearance of traditional fiber knowledge and techniques: weaving, spinning, dyeing, shearing and the like. Learning in a personal and culturally specific context was critical to the experience in order to best realize and preserve the traditional information. In other words, books and diagrams are fine but to learn the respect, history and nuances from an experienced practitioner provides an immeasurably richer experience. Little could I have predicted the state of education, arts education in particular, thirty-plus years later. At that time I felt a kinship with past artisans, with Arts and Crafts figures such as William Morris and with then current environmental artists Robert Smithson, Christo and Andy Goldsworthy. Little did I know that whole new fields, Sustainable Art and Sustainable Design, would develop along with a wave of artists interested in sustainability or sustainable art practices. Though we had been evolving towards art studios little concerned with traditional techniques, time-tested materials and self-involved and often wasteful young artists, a part of our current culture has encouraged us to return the art studio to its roots.

Traditionally the training of artists was not divorced from sustainable practices: preparing materials from natural resources, conserving materials and creating art to last for an extended period of time. Students then were trained to have their artwork reflect content of the particular time and culture in which it was created.

At times it provided stable messages while often literally illustrated new ways of thinking. College-level art education today is moving to responsibly take advantage of our past to move towards a more sustainable practice of the visual arts. We are starting to move beyond sustainability as defined by recycling our paper! There is much interest in 'green' art movements and their artists, in less toxic art materials, in assignments and classes open to new ways of developing artworks and in history, criticism and aesthetics of art which can bring us closer to richer and authentic art experiences based on sustainability. This new awareness is bringing us better ties to resources, to cultures other than our own, to social justice and to the realities of a new economy.

The Art Department at Luther College might be used as an example of this change as faculty members are exposed to and involved with the challenge of sustainability.

- The Center for the Arts, dedicated in 2003, sets an environmental tone with a geothermal heating /cooling system and efficient use of space. Trees removed from the construction site were saved, dried and collaboratively made into a site-specific sculpture, "I Am", by visiting artist Jeff Boshart. Remaining lumber has been employed as the materials for benches around the outside of the art building and across campus.
- At the 2009 FATE Conference, Foundations in Art: Theory in Education, four department members attended or presented a sessions on topics including Environment and Sustainability, Community and Social Responsibility, and Crossing Disciplines. Ideas and energy from this conference continue to feed class design and curriculum modification.
- The department is small and we have developed an active guest artist program enabling our students to have exposure to a wide variety of artists. This past year our usual activities were enhanced by support from the Luther Sense of Vocations Program. Both of the visitors we brought in devoted their time on campus to encouraging by life example sustainable art actions. Tami Petro, sustainable designer and educator, encouraged students to consider sustainable design as a means of expanding individual understanding and activities in this area. Luther grad and painter Laura Hampton not only exhibited and spoke about her work. She also helped students to understand cultural and artistic aspects of sustainability during numerous meetings with students. Understanding cross-cultural art teaching based on experiences of teaching at the Navajo reservation's college was the topic of another of her presentations.
- Classes in the department represent an increasing awareness of sustainability. Though it has always been a consideration in Scandinavian Fine Handcrafts, Book Arts and Weaving, we have added the Green Book and a Nicaraguan J-Term class working with the Potters for Peace. Foundations classes offer many examples of assignments in which alternatives to standard art materials might be effectively employed. Classes on the Arts in Hawaii and the American Landscape are being considered.
- We look to the future when even more paper will be made from rags in our paper mill, when students will seek more healthful and sustainable materials, when more art will reflect messages of sustainability, when more cross-curricular classes will link art and the environment and when art history will have offerings on Sustainable Art and Design as well as the Environmental movements in art.

While the journey of one Luther Professor and her department do not signal a revolution in the liberal arts studio experience, they are indicators to those outside that interest in sustainability it is not foreign to our discipline and is now growing. Further, our experience can give encouragement to other departments in art to make concrete steps in this direction. It can offer to those outside the discipline points of interest, which may develop into cross-curricular ideas.